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Spain's Reaction to the Recent EU Decision on Biotechnology

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Approved By:

Rachel Bickford, Agricultural Attaché

Prepared By:

Carmen Toledo

Report Highlights:

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Spain's view on Europe's new policy on transgenic crops

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January 13, 2015: The European Parliament, with the support of the Social Democrats and Popular Party, has finally approved a reform of the EU directive on GM crops, allowing Member States to decide if they will allow GM crops in their own territories.

This reform is the result of the Greek initiative during their Presidency to make a compromise proposal to the EU Ministers of Environment to unblock the reform of the Directive on GM crops in June 2014. This controversial issue had been blocked since 2010. Ministers approved the new Directive by majority, 26 Member States voted in favor of the Reform (Spain amongst them) while only Belgium and Luxemburg abstained, after Germany, France and the UK lifted their reservations about the Directive. However, the text still had to be discussed and approved by the European Parliament.

Now the European Parliament has approved the new Directive with 480 votes in favor, 159 against and 58 abstentions. It will be in force this spring. The positions among the major EU countries are divided between those who favor this type of crops (UK and Spain) and those who are opposed to their development (Germany and France). Finally, the EU has agreed on this intermediate position, giving freedom to the MS governments to ban GM crops in their own territory GM crops that are allowed in other Member States.

The reactions to the changes are diverse and opposed, and do not appear to have satisfied anyone.

The Spanish government had higher expectations, to unfreeze the approval of permits for new crops that already had the support of the European Food Safety Agency. However, Fernando Miranda, Head of Productions and Agricultural Markets in the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, considers that "it is a step forward", although they are not satisfied. Ministry sources have commented to the FAS/Madrid office that while Spain is not happy with the decision, at least it is a decision. Previously, authorizations for genetically modified seeds were for all countries of the European Union and now that has changed.

It is important to note that Spain has been growing genetically modified maize since 2003 and closed 2014 with more than 131,500 hectares of cultivated maize (MON810). Spain is the leading producer of GM maize in the EU (represent 31.6% of total corn grown in Spain and 90% of GM maize in the EU) followed by Portugal with about 8,500 hectares cultivated (6.3%). This modified variety is also cultivated in other countries, such as the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia.

At the moment, this is the only GM crop that is used throughout the European Union, according to Carlos Alberto Vicente, Director of Sustainability of Monsanto Europe and the Middle East. He believes

that this directive “undermines the single market” when allow individual Member States to ban GM crops and “it is a dangerous precedent”.

On the contrary, Tom Kucharz, from Ecologist in Action believes that this will expedite the process and it can allow a massive entry of other GMOs in countries that favor GMOs.

It is interesting to note that those who were opposed to GM crops where those who promoted the initiative to change the Directive, but now some of them believe that it will give more freedom to those countries who favor GM crops like Spain, and it will make the authorization process easier for businesses.

Let’s remember that the reason that triggered the reform was the situation created when the EU Ministers could neither approve nor deny the transgenic maize 1507 of Pioneer in February last year. Although 19 countries voted against and only 5 in favor, they could not reached the qualified majority, and therefore, the European Commission declared that, according to the current law at the time, the new GM maize would have to be approved. At that moment, it was evident for most that a reform was required to avoid situations like that. The reform would be in the direction to give more flexibility to countries to ban GMOs in their countries, based in other reasons apart from those of risk for the health or environment. At that moment, some countries like France, Greece, Germany, Luxemburg, Bulgaria, Austria and Hungary had already measures against GM crops.

Greenpeace also noted that the Directive will allow Regional Governments to ban GM crops in their territories and that is positive. This could be the case in Spain of the Basque Country or Asturias that oppose these crops. However, the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture has reminded that the authorizations for crops are under the management of the Ministry in Madrid.

The Green Party also believes that this decision sets a dangerous precedent, but for completely different motives. They believe that this Directive re-nationalizes a very important European policy and that it will give more power to multinationals.

On the other hand, the Biotechnology companies of the EU, grouped in EuropaBio, are not happy with the changes because it will allow Member States to ban products authorized by the EFSA due to other reasons than scientific reasons.

The Belgian Liberal MEP Frédérique Ries, sponsor of this legislation for parliamentary procedure, has pointed out that "The debate between pro and anti-GMO is far from over," he added " This agreement will allow more flexibility for Member States.”

The new procedure of authorization is divided in two phases:

- Phase one: Member States can notify to the Commission if they wish to be excluded geographically from the use of the GMO in question. Brussels will negotiate with the company

and if the company accepts the restrictions, it will propose that the transgenic is authorized in the other countries that were not excluded.

- Phase two: If the company refuses the restrictions, Member States will have to inform about the reasons why they ban the GM crops in their territory. These reasons must be different from those evaluated by the EFSA.

According to Fernando Miranda "The problem is that it has not been established that countries that exclude themselves from the authorization process are left out of the vote on new permits" so "the block to permits can be maintained," Miranda stated.

Anyway, the Spanish Minister of Agriculture, Isabel Garcia Tejerina considers the new Directive a step forward in order to unblock the situation of GMOs that were blocked regardless the favorable reports from the EFSA. She has also mentioned that "the position of Spain has always been that which supports their decisions on the evaluations carried out by scientists and independent technicians." It is important for her that Europe is not left behind in the development of technology applied to agriculture, and now those countries who wish to do so will be able to apply new technologies.

The Spanish Minister of Agriculture supports the use of the technology that can help the cattle sector, always under strict guarantees and even stricter evaluations from the EFSA.

So far, the end use of the corn MON810 grown in Spain is feed production, although the European authorization, dating from 1998, also includes human consumption. The director of Monsanto, Carlos Alberto Vicente, stresses that the main "advantage" of corn sold by his company is its resistance to the European Corn Borer. The territorial distribution of this modified crop in Spain corresponds to the areas where there is a higher incidence of this insect, focused on the Ebro valley and parts of Extremadura and Andalusia.

Now it will be interesting to see which way the new Directive on GM crops go.